

2

1789: The End of the *Ancien Régime*

POINTS TO CONSIDER

The enormous problems that confronted Louis XVI compelled him to summon the Estates-General. This met in May 1789. A combination of Louis' attempts to control the situation and the determination of his opponents to resist, brought about a rapidly escalating crisis that resulted in the downfall of the *ancien régime*. The events of this momentous year are considered under five themes:

- The Estates-General – the early meetings and their consequences
- The revolt in Paris – storming of the Bastille and the popular movement
- The Revolution in the provinces
- The dismantling of the *ancien régime*
- The reaction of the monarchy

Key dates

1789	May 5	Estates-General met at Versailles
	June 17	National Assembly proclaimed
	June 20	Tennis Court Oath
	July 10	Formation of the citizens' militia
	July 14	The storming of the Bastille
	July 20	Start of the Great Fear
	August 4	Decrees dismantling feudalism passed
	August 26	Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen
	October 5–6	'October Days'
	November 2	Church property nationalised

1789 is not only one of the most important years in French history, it is also central to the history of Europe. As events escalated out of Louis' control, resulting in the collapse of the *ancien régime* in France, new structures were created. The emergence of a more democratic system of government as a consequence of popular upheaval set a precedent for other downtrodden people in other countries.

1 | The Estates-General

As we saw in Chapter 1, by late 1788 the financial and political problems facing the Crown had forced Louis XVI to summon the Estates-General. This was the first time it had been summoned since 1614, and presented the government with a number of concerns.

- What method would the Estates-General use to vote on any issue presented to it – by head or by estate?
- Who would be elected as deputies to the Estates-General?
- To what extent should the grievances noted in the *cahiers* be addressed?

The method of voting

The recently restored Paris *parlement* (see page 17) declared that the Estates-General should meet as in 1614 and that voting should be by estate or order. This would favour the two privileged orders, who wished to protect their privileges and tended to act together. Up to this point the bourgeoisie had taken little part in political agitation. The bourgeoisie had tended to follow the lead given by the privileged classes (the nobles and the clergy) in the *parlements* and the Assembly of Notables.

In 1789 bourgeois leaders of the Third Estate began to suspect that the privileged orders who wanted **voting by order** had opposed the government because they wanted power for themselves and not because they wanted justice for the nation as a whole. The Third Estate now demanded twice the number of deputies (so that they would have as many deputies as the other two orders combined), and **voting by head** instead of voting by order. This form of voting would give them a majority, as many of the First Estate's deputies were poor parish priests who were likely to support the Third Estate.

In December 1788, the King's Council allowed the number of Third Estate deputies to be doubled. Nothing was said about voting by head. When the Estates-General met there was confusion. The Third Estate assumed that there would be voting by head (otherwise doubling served no purpose), while the first two Estates believed that this was not the case.

Electing the deputies

The government did not make any attempt to influence the elections to the Estates-General and had no candidates of its own. Yet it was to a degree concerned that the deputies who were chosen would in general be sympathetic to the dire economic circumstances it was in, and be supportive to any proposals made by the King.

For the First Estate, the clergy overwhelmingly elected parish priests to represent them: only 51 of the 291 deputies were bishops.

In the Second Estate, the majority of noble deputies were from old noble families in the provinces, many of them poor and

Key question
Why was the method of voting important?

Voting by order
Each estate votes separately on any issue. Any two estates together would outvote the third.

Voting by head
Decisions taken by the Estates-General would be agreed by a simple vote with a majority sufficient to agree any policy. This favoured the Third Estate, which had the most deputies.

Key terms

Key question
Who were the deputies elected to the Estates-General?



Profile: Abbé Emmanuel Sieyès 1748–1836

- 1748 – Born in Fréjus into a bourgeois family
- 1773 – Ordained as a priest
- 1787 – Elected as a clerical representative at the provincial Assembly of Orleans, where he was particularly interested in issues relating to taxation, agriculture and poor relief
- 1789 – Published a highly influential pamphlet *What is the Third Estate?* in which he argued that it was the most important part of the nation. Represented the Third Estate of Paris in the Estates-General. Drew up the Tennis Court Oath and contributed to the Declaration of the Rights of Man
- 1792 – Elected to the Convention and voted for the King's execution but took no active part in the Terror
- 1793 – Following Thermidor he served on the **Committee of Public Safety**
- 1794 – Elected to the Council of 500
- 1798 – Appointed ambassador to Berlin
- 1799 – Elected Director and plotted the *Coup* of Brumaire with Bonaparte. Left public office during the Napoleonic Empire and retired from public life

Key term

Committee of Public Safety

Effectively, the government of France during 1793–4 and one of the twin pillars of the Terror along with the CGS (see page 107).

Sieyès was one of the main constitutional planners of the revolutionary period. When asked what he had done during the Terror he declared 'I survived'. He helped draw up the constitutions linked with the Revolution and was one of its most influential political thinkers.

Key terms

Conservatives

Those who did not want any reforms. They were deeply suspicious and sceptical of the need for any social or political change.

Liberals

Deputies who were far more tolerant of differing political views and who supported a measure of cautious reform.

conservative, but 90 out of the 282 could be classed as **liberals** and these were to play a leading role in the Estates-General.

The 580 deputies elected to represent the Third Estate were educated, articulate and almost entirely well-off, largely because deputies were expected to pay their own expenses. This was something peasants and artisans could not afford. Not a single peasant or urban worker was elected. The largest group of Third Estate deputies were venal office holders (43 per cent), followed by lawyers (35 per cent), although two-thirds of deputies had some legal qualification. Only 13 per cent were from trade and industry. This meant that the industrial middle class did not play a leading role in events leading to the Revolution or, indeed, in the Revolution itself.

All the adult male members of the two privileged orders had a vote for electing their deputies. The Third Estate however was to be chosen by a complicated system of indirect election. Frenchmen over the age of 25 were entitled to vote in a primary assembly, either of their parish or their urban guild, if they paid taxes. At these primary assemblies they would choose representatives who in turn elected the deputies.

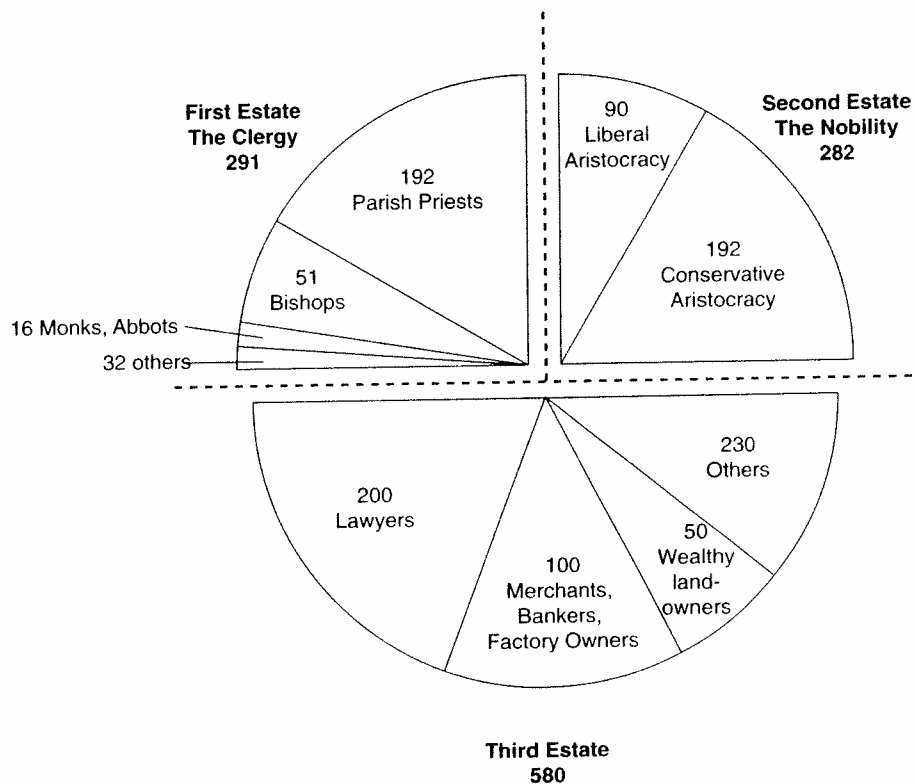


Figure 2.1: The composition of the deputies in the Estates-General 1789

Cahiers

Before the meeting of the Estates-General the electors of each of the three orders drew up *cahiers* – lists of grievances and suggestions for reform.

The *cahiers* of the First Estate reflected the interests of the parish clergy. They called for an end to bishops holding more than one diocese, and demanded that those who were not noble be able to become bishops. In return they were prepared to give up the financial privileges of the Church. They were not, however, prepared to give up the dominant position of the Church: Catholicism should remain the established religion and retain control of education. They did not intend to tolerate Protestantism.

The nobles' *cahiers* were surprisingly liberal – 89 per cent were prepared to give up their financial privileges and nearly 39 per cent supported voting by head, at least on matters of general interest. Instead of trying to preserve their own privileges, they showed a desire for change and were prepared to admit that merit rather than birth should be the key to high office. They attacked the government for its despotism, its inefficiency and its injustice. On many issues they were more liberal than the Third Estate.

The *cahiers* of all three orders had a great deal in common. All were against absolute royal power and all wanted a King whose

Key question
What concerns were reflected in the *cahiers*?

powers would be limited by an elected assembly, which would have the right to vote taxes and pass laws. Only one major issue separated the Third Estate from the other two orders – voting by head. It was this that was to cause conflict when the Estates-General met.

Key question

How did the demands of the Third Estate lead to the creation of a National Assembly?

Key terms

Constitution

The establishment of structures for governing a country. Among the most important of these are the making of laws, forming governments, conduct of elections, division of powers. The detail relating to these structures would be presented in the form of a written document.

Séance royale

Session of the Estates-General in the presence of the monarch.

The Meeting of the Estates-General

When the Estates-General met on 5 May 1789 the government had the opportunity to take control of the situation. The Third Estate deputies, lacking experience and having no recognised leaders, would have supported the King if he had promised reforms, but the government did not take the initiative and put forward no programme. Necker talked about making taxation fairer but did not mention any other reform. Nothing was said about a new **constitution**, which all the *cahiers* had demanded.

Although the Estates-General met as three separate groups, the Third Estate insisted that the credentials (details relating to eligibility, status, etc.) of those who claimed to have been elected should be verified in a common session comprising the deputies of all three estates. This appeared a trivial matter but was seen by everyone as setting a precedent of deciding whether the Estates-General should meet as one body (and vote by head) when discussing all other matters. The nobles rejected the Third Estate's demand and declared themselves a separate order by 188 votes to 46, as did the clergy but with a slender majority of 19 (133 to 114). The Third Estate refused to do anything until the other two orders joined them, so weeks of inaction followed, with the government failing to provide any leadership.

The National Assembly

On 10 June, the deadlock was broken when the Third Estate passed a motion that it would begin verifying the deputies' credentials, even if the other two orders did not accept their invitation to join in. A trickle of priests joined the Third Estate in the following days. After a debate on 15 June the deputies of the Third Estate on 17 June voted by 490 to 90 to call themselves the National Assembly. The Third Estate was now claiming that, as it represented most of the nation, it had the right to manage its affairs and decide taxation. Events were rapidly moving out of the control of the government, especially when on 19 June the clergy voted to join the Third Estate.

Key question

How did Louis react to actions of the Estates-General?

The Tennis Court Oath

All of this was a direct challenge to the authority of the King, who was at last forced to act. On 23 June, he decided to hold a Royal Session known as a *séance royale*, attended by all three Estates, when he would propose a series of reforms. On 20 June 1789 the deputies of the Third Estate found that the hall in which they met had been closed to prepare for the Royal Session. They had not been informed and were furious. They met instead on a tennis court nearby and took an oath, known as the Tennis Court Oath, not to disperse until they had given France a constitution, thus



A painting of the Tennis Court Oath by Jacques-Louis David. Look closely at the image. How does the artist seek to portray the great importance and drama of this occasion?

claiming that the King did not have the right to dissolve them. Only one member voted against the motion; since, only three days before, 90 had voted against a motion to call themselves the National Assembly, it was clear that the deputies were rapidly becoming more radical.

The response of the Crown

To restore a measure of royal authority, Necker advised the King to hold a *séance royale*. It was hoped that the King would ignore the events of 10–17 June and accept voting in common on all important matters. Louis, under pressure from the Queen and his brothers, ignored this advice and came down very firmly on the side of the privileged orders. When the *séance royale* met on the 23 June, Louis declared null and void the decisions taken by the deputies of the Third Estate on 17 June. He would not allow the privileges of the nobility and clergy to be discussed in common.

The King was however, prepared to accept considerable restrictions on his own power. No taxes would be imposed without

The Tennis Court Oath – deputies of the National Assembly meet at a tennis court in Versailles and swear that they will secure a constitution for France: 20 June 1789

Key date

Key term

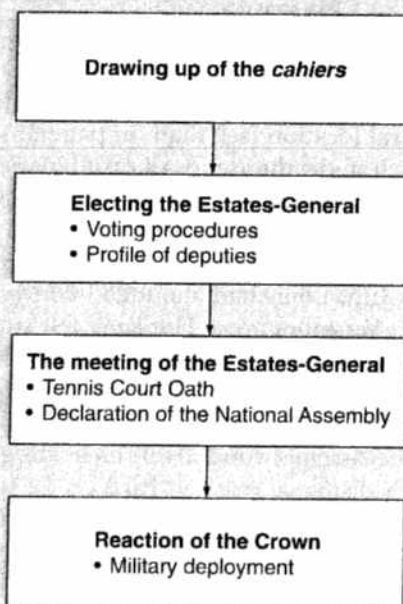
Lettres de cachet
Scaled instructions from the Crown allowing detention without trial of a named individual.

the consent of the representatives of the nation, *lettres de cachet* would be abolished and freedom of the press introduced. Internal customs barriers, and the *gabelle* and *corvée* were to be abolished. If these reforms had been put forward in May, a majority of the Third Estate would probably have been satisfied, but now they did not go far enough. The King ended by ordering the deputies to disperse and meet in their separate assemblies.

The next day, 24 June, 151 clergy joined the Third Estate. The day after that, 47 nobles, including one of Louis' leading opponents, the Duc d'Orléans, did the same. There were popular demonstrations in Paris in favour of the Assembly. On 27 June, the King gave way. He reversed his decision of 23 June and ordered the nobles and clergy to join the Third Estate and vote by head.

Louis was contemplating another strategy – military force. He had ordered troops to be moved to Paris and Versailles on 22 June. By late June, nearly 4000 troops, including 2600 in foreign-speaking units, were stationed round Paris. Many of these troops were élite units of the army – the French guards, whose loyalty to the Crown Louis believed to be certain. This caused alarm in the capital. Government claims that they were there simply to preserve order seemed to have been sincere – until the last week in June. On 26 June, 4800 extra troops were ordered into the Paris region and on 1 July, 11,500 more. In less than a week the strength of army units called to Paris increased from 4000 to over 20,000. It was impossible to doubt any longer that the King and his advisers had decided to dissolve the National Assembly, by force if necessary. In this desperate situation the Assembly was saved by the revolt of the people of Paris.

Summary diagram: The Estates-General



Key date

2 | The Revolt in Paris

In the spring and summer of 1789 the population of Paris was facing difficult times. The economic crisis (see page 17) was causing hardship, which led to anti-government feelings and fuelled the rise of the **popular movement**.

The economic crisis in Paris

In normal times a worker spent up to 50 per cent of his income on bread. In August 1788 the price of a 1.8 kg loaf was 9 *sous* (1 *livre* = 20 *sous* – a *livre* would be equivalent to about eight pence). By March 1789, it had risen to over 14 *sous* per loaf (see Figure 1.3, page 17). By the spring of 1789 a Parisian worker could be spending 88 per cent of his wages on bread. This caused hardship and unrest amongst the Parisian population. For example, on 28 April, the premises of a prosperous wallpaper manufacturer, Réveillon, were set on fire, following a rumour that he was going to reduce wages. But this riot was more a violent protest against the scarcity and high price of bread than a protest against wages. At least 50 people were killed or wounded by troops.

Thus the situation was very volatile when the Estates-General met. Economic issues (the price of bread and unemployment) were, for the first time, pushing France towards revolution. Falling living standards were creating dissatisfaction, which in turn led to discontent. Political opponents of the King were harnessing this discontent to bring crowds on to the streets to save the National Assembly. The economic crisis created a dangerously unstable situation and contributed to the emergence of a 'popular movement'. Protests among workers and small traders were directed against the government because of its inability to deal with the economic crisis.

The popular movement

In late June, journalists and politicians established a permanent headquarters in the Palais Royal in Paris, home of the Duc d'Orléans. Its central location (see map on page 35) made it a popular venue. Each night thousands of ordinary Parisians gathered to listen to revolutionary speakers such as Camille Desmoulins. The Palais Royal became the unofficial headquarters of the popular movement whose activities were directed through its speakers. By 11 July, Louis had about 25,000 troops in total located in the Paris-Versailles area. The King felt strong enough to dismiss Necker. Necker was at the height of his popularity and was considered as the only minister able to tackle the financial crisis. The deputies of the Estates-General expected Louis to use force to dissolve the Assembly and arrest its leading members.

News of Necker's dismissal reached Paris on 12 July, where it inspired large-scale popular demonstrations against the King. The population of Paris feared that this marked the start of Louis' attempt to restore his power by means of force. Parisians flocked to the Palais Royal, where speakers called on them to take up

Key question

What impact did the economic crisis have on the population of Paris?

Popular movement

Crowds of ordinary Parisians who became politically active as a consequence of the economic crisis. They demanded a political role as a means of improving their living standards.

Key term

Key question

How important was the popular movement in the outbreak of the Revolution?

Key term

Gardes-françaises
A royal infantry regiment, many of whom deserted to opponents of the King in July 1789. They helped capture the Bastille.

arms. A frantic search began for muskets and ammunition. Gunsmith shops were looted and many ordinary people began arming themselves. There were clashes with royal troops guarding the Tuileries. When the *Gardes-françaises* were ordered to withdraw from Paris many disobeyed their orders and deserted to the representatives of the people of Paris. Discipline in this elite unit was deteriorating rapidly. On the same day crowds of poor Parisians attacked the hated customs posts that surrounded Paris and imposed duties on goods, including food, entering the city. Out of 54 posts, 40 were destroyed. Fearing an imminent attack by royal forces, barricades were thrown up on 13 July across many streets in Paris to impede the movement of royal troops.

The capture of the Bastille

Their search for weapons took the Parisian demonstrators to *Les Invalides*, an old soldiers' retirement home that also served as an arsenal, where they seized over 28,000 muskets and 20 cannon. They were still short of gunpowder and cartridges, so they marched on the fortress of the Bastille. This imposing royal prison was a permanent reminder of the power of the *ancien régime*. News of the desertions among the *Gardes-françaises* led the army commanders to advise the King that the reliability of the troops to crush the rising could not be counted on.

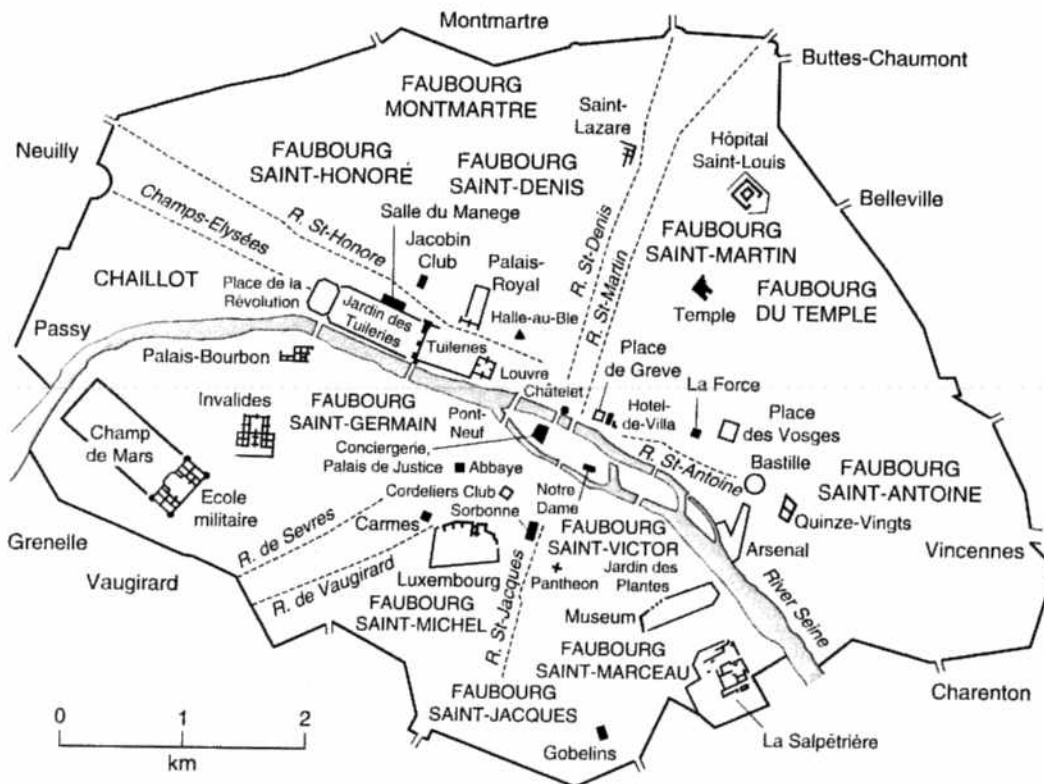


Figure 2.2: The main locations in revolutionary Paris

Throughout late June, many *Gardes-françaises*, who worked at various trades in Paris in their off-duty hours and mixed with the population, were being influenced by agitators at the Palais Royal. As early as 24 June, two companies had refused to go on duty. By 14 July 1789, five out of six battalions of *Gardes-françaises* had deserted and some joined the Parisians besieging the Bastille. There were 5000 other troops nearby, but the officers told their commander that they could not rely on their men. Troops were removed from the streets of Paris to the Champ de Mars, a wide-open area south of the river Seine, where they did nothing.

The crowd outside the Bastille were denied entry by the governor, de Launay, who also refused to hand over any gunpowder. There was no intention of storming the fortress, although a group managed to enter the inner courtyard. De Launay ordered his troops to open fire on them and 98 were killed. *Gardes-françaises* supporting the crowd, using cannon taken from *Les Invalides* that morning, overcame the defenders. De Launay was forced to surrender. He was murdered and decapitated by an enraged crowd.

Those who had taken part in the attack on the Bastille were not wealthy middle class but *sans-culottes*. At the height of the rebellion about a quarter of a million Parisians were under arms. This was the first and most famous of the *journées*, which occurred at decisive moments during the course of the Revolution.

The establishment of the Commune of Paris

The popular disturbances in early July 1789 were not planned. They were the reaction of ordinary people to the actions of the King and his ministers. The respectable bourgeoisie of Paris were afraid that a breakdown of law and order was occurring, resulting in the destruction of property, looting and attacks on individuals and property. To regain control of the situation, and prevent the indiscriminate arming of the population, on 15 July the Paris

The date the Bastille was captured is commemorated annually as France's national day: 14 July 1789

Key date

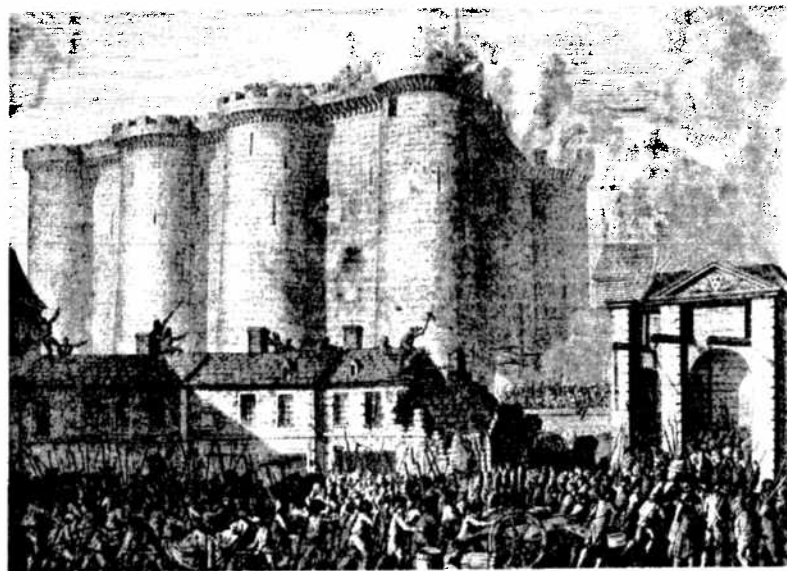
Journée

Day of popular action and disturbance linked to great political change.

Key term

Key question

What was the significance of the setting up of the Paris Commune?



The Storming of the Bastille, 14 July 1789. What does this print suggest about the storming of the Bastille?

Key date

Formation of the citizens' militia, which becomes the National Guard: 10 July 1789

Key question

Why was the storming of the Bastille important?

Key terms

Citizens' militia

A bourgeois defence force set up to protect the interests of property owners in Paris. After the storming of the Bastille it became the National Guard.

Menu peuple

Used to describe ordinary people living in towns.

Émigrés

People, mainly aristocrats, who fled France during the Revolution. Many *émigrés* joined foreign opponents of the Revolution.

electors (representatives of the 60 electoral districts that had chosen the deputies to the Estates-General), set up a new body to govern the city. This was known as the Commune and it would be at the forefront of the clash between Parisians and the King. Sylvain Bailly was elected the mayor of Paris to carry out the Commune's policies.

On 10 July 1789, shortly before the formation of the Commune, the electors of Paris proposed forming a **citizens' militia** to defend the interests of property owners. It was envisaged that the militia would be predominantly bourgeois, and that the *sans-culottes* would be excluded from its ranks. It had the double purpose of protecting property against the attacks of the **menu peuple** and of defending Paris against any possible threat by royal troops. It was these electors and the supporters of the Duc d'Orléans who were to turn what had begun as spontaneous riots into a general rising. On 15 July the citizens' militia became the National Guard and Lafayette was appointed its commander.

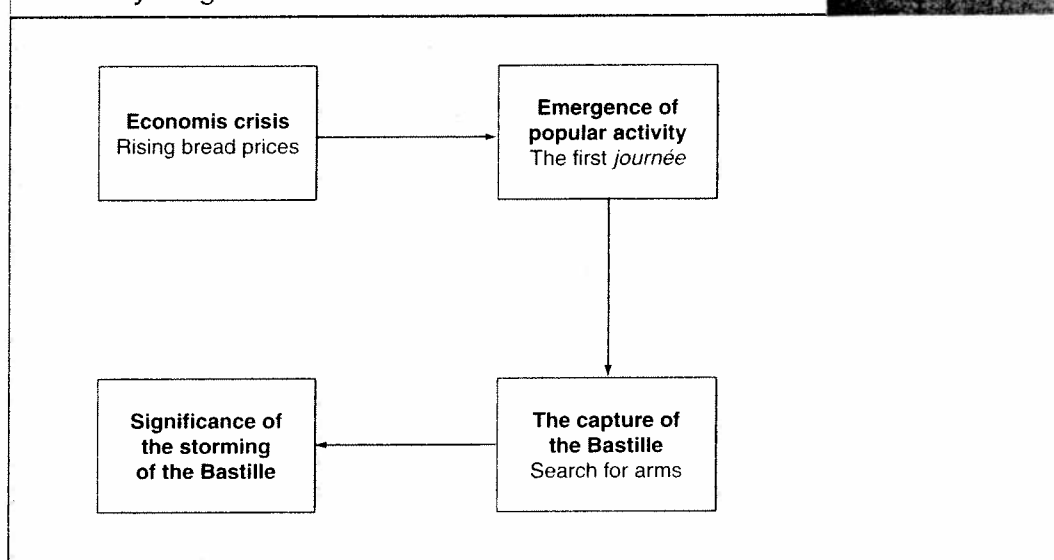
The significance of the storming of the Bastille

The events in Paris on 14 July had far-reaching results:

- The King had lost control of Paris, where the electors set up a Commune to run the city.
- Lafayette (see page 82) was appointed commander of the predominantly bourgeois National Guard.
- The Assembly (which on 9 July had taken the name of the National Constituent Assembly) prepared to draw up a constitution, no longer under threat of being dissolved by the King.
- Real power had passed from the King to the elected representatives of the people. Louis now had to share his power with the National Assembly.
- Louis was no longer in a position to dictate to the Assembly, because he could not rely upon the army.
- News of the fall of the Bastille spread through France and intensified activity among the peasantry.
- The revolt of Paris led to the emigration of some nobles, led by the King's brother the Comte d'Artois: 20,000 *émigrés* fled abroad in two months.

On 17 July, the King journeyed to Paris from Versailles, where the people gave him a hostile reception. Louis recognised the new revolutionary council – the Commune – and the National Guard, and wore in his hat the red, white and blue cockade of the Revolution (red and blue – the colours of Paris, were added to the white of the Bourbons). The significance of the King's humiliation was not lost on foreign diplomats. Gouverneur Morris, later the US ambassador to France, told George Washington: 'You may consider the Revolution to be over, since the authority of the King and the nobles has been utterly destroyed'. Far from the Revolution being over, as news of events in Paris spread throughout France, it influenced what occurred elsewhere in the country.

Summary diagram: The revolt in Paris of 1789



3 | The Revolution in the Provinces

The movement, which is known as the Municipal Revolution, covered the whole of the month of July 1789. It varied in scope and extent from one area to another. The provinces followed events in Paris with great interest, and received regular news of events in the letters sent back by their deputies in Versailles. There was activity in some towns before the revolt in Paris, but the Paris revolt had far-reaching implications. News of the storming of the Bastille was known in the provinces between 16 and 19 July, depending on the distance from Paris. As a consequence of the revolt of Paris, the authority of the King collapsed in most French towns. His orders would now be obeyed only if they had been approved by the newly formed National Constituent Assembly.

Most provincial towns waited to hear what had happened in Paris before they acted. 'The Parisian spirit of commotion', wrote the English traveller and writer Arthur Young, from Strasbourg on 21 July, 'spreads quickly'. Nearly everywhere there was a municipal revolution in which the bourgeoisie played a leading part. This took various forms.

In some towns the old council merely broadened its membership and carried on as before. In Bordeaux, the electors of the Third Estate seized control, closely following the example of Paris. In most towns, including Lille, Rouen and Lyon, the old municipal corporations which operated during the *ancien régime*, and which excluded ordinary people, were overthrown by force; in others, like Dijon and Pamiers, the former councils were allowed to stay in office, but were integrated into a committee on

Key question

What was the significance of the municipal revolution in those areas beyond Paris?

Key term

Counter-revolutionaries

Those groups and individuals who were hostile to the Revolution and the changes it imposed, and wished to reverse them at the earliest opportunity.

Key question

Why did events in Paris contribute to revolt in the countryside?

which they were a minority. Citizens' militias were set up in several towns, such as Marseille, before the National Guard was formed in Paris. In Rouen revolutionaries seized power at the beginning of July, before the revolt in the capital, following food riots.

In nearly every town a National Guard was formed, as in Paris, it was designed both to control popular violence and prevent **counter-revolution**. Nearly all *intendants* abandoned their posts. The King had lost control of Paris and of the provincial towns. He was to lose control of the countryside through the peasant revolution.

The Rural Revolt

The peasants played no part in the events that led up to the revolution until the spring of 1789. It was the bad harvest of 1788 that gave them a role, because of the great misery and hardship in the countryside. Most peasants had to buy their bread and were, therefore, badly affected by the rise in its price in the spring and summer of 1789. They also suffered from the depression in the textile industry, as many owned hand-loom and were small-scale producers of cloth. From January 1789 grain convoys and the premises of suspected hoarders were attacked. Since this violence tended to occur when food was scarce it would probably have died out when the new crop was harvested in the summer.

What made these food riots more important than usual were the political events that were taking place. The calling of the Estates-General aroused general excitement amongst the peasants. They believed that the King would not have asked them to state their grievances in the *cahiers* if he did not intend to do something about them.

Events in Paris, particularly the fall of the Bastille, also had a tremendous effect on the countryside. Risings immediately followed in Normandy and Franche Comté. Demonstrations and riots against taxes, the tithe and feudal dues spread throughout the country; it appeared that law and order had collapsed everywhere.

On the great estates of the Church and other landowners, there were storehouses of grain that had been collected as rents, feudal dues and tithes. In the spring and summer of 1789 they were the only places where grain was held in bulk. Landlords were regarded as hoarders. The President of the Grenoble *parlement* wrote on the 28 June: 'There is daily talk of attacking the nobility, of setting fire to their châteaux in order to burn all their title-deeds'.

The main features of rural protest were:

- grain stores were looted
- châteaux were attacked and frequently burnt
- documents known as 'terriers' which listed peasant obligations were seized and destroyed.

The Great Fear

Although hundreds of châteaux were ransacked and many were set on fire, there was remarkably little bloodshed – landowners or their agents were killed only when they resisted. On 20 July 1789, the attacks on the châteaux which started on the 20 July 1789 were part of what became known as the Great Fear (*Grande Peur*). These disturbances lasted until 6 August 1789. They began with local rumours that bands of brigands, in the pay of the aristocracy, were going to destroy the harvest. The peasants took up arms to await the brigands and when they did not appear, turned their anger against the landlords. The Great Fear spread the peasant rising throughout most of France. However, some areas that were further away from Paris, such as Brittany, Alsace and the Basque region, were unaffected.

The start in the countryside of widespread attacks on the property of large landowners, during what is known as the 'Great Fear':
20 July 1789

The start of the process of dismantling the feudal system:
4 August 1789

Key dates

4 | Dismantling the *Ancien Régime*

The Assembly was in a dilemma. It could not ask the King's troops to crush the peasants, because afterwards they might be turned against the Assembly itself. Yet the Assembly could not allow the anarchy in the countryside to continue. This could be ended, and the support of the peasants gained for the Assembly and for the Revolution, by giving them at least part of what they wanted.

Key question
How did the actions of the peasantry contribute to the collapse of the *ancien régime*?

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The August Decrees

On 3 August, leaders of the **patriot party** drew up a plan for the liberal nobles to propose the dismantling of the feudal system. On the night of 4 August 1789, the Vicomte de Noailles, followed by the Duc d'Anguillon, one of the richest landowners in France, proposed that obligations relating to personal service should be abolished without compensation: these included serfdom and the *corvée*. Other rights such as *champart* and *lods et ventes* (see page 10) were regarded as a form of property and, although proposed to be abolished, were to be redeemed (paid for by the peasant). But these were the dues that affected the peasant most severely, so there was little satisfaction in the countryside with the limited nature of the reforms.

The proposed changes were given legal form in the decrees of 5–11 August, which stated that:

The National Assembly abolishes the feudal system entirely. It decrees that, as regards feudal rights and dues ... those relating ... to personal serfdom ... are abolished without compensation; all the others are declared to be redeemable ...

All seigneurial courts are abolished without any compensation.

Amid great excitement, the example of Noailles and Anguillon was followed by other noble deputies, who queued up to renounce their privileges in a spirit of patriotic fervour. The changes proposed went far beyond those demanded by the *cahiers*.

Patriot party
A loose group of progressive reformers, mainly nobles and bourgeoisie who wanted changes to the political structure – a reduction in royal power in order to enhance their own positions.

Key term

The main ones were:

- tithes payable to the Church were abolished
- abolition of venality
- all financial and tax privileges relating to land or persons abolished
- all citizens to be taxed equally
- special privileges (including tax exemption) for provinces, principalities, pays, cantons, towns and villages were abolished
- all citizens without distinction of birth were eligible for all offices – whether ecclesiastical, civil or military.

When the Assembly adjourned at 2 am on 5 August the deputies were weeping for joy. One of the deputies Duquesnoy exclaimed 'What a nation! What glory. What honour to the French!'

Key question

How important were the August decrees?

Significance of the Decrees

The August Decrees were very important in starting the process of dismantling the *ancien régime*. Although there was still a great deal to be done, they marked the end of noble power and the privilege of birth by establishing a society based on civil equality. All Frenchmen had the same rights and duties, could enter any profession according to their ability and would pay the same taxes. Of course, equality in theory was different from equality in practice. The career open to talent benefited the bourgeoisie rather than the peasant or worker, who lacked the education to take advantage of it. Nevertheless, French society would never be the same again – the old society (the *ancien régime*) of orders and privilege had gone.

The peasants – the vast mass of the population – were committed to the new regime, at least in so far as it removed their feudal obligations. They did not like having to compensate landowners for the loss of their feudal dues. Many stopped paying them, until they were finally abolished without compensation in 1793. Some peasants, in areas such as Brittany and the Vendée, were to become active opponents of the Revolution (see Chapter 4). For most peasants, the Revolution marked the end of the feudal system and they feared that if they did not support the changes, then aristocratic privilege and the tithe would return and they would lose all they had gained.

The August Decrees had swept away institutions like the provincial estates and cleared the way for a national, uniform system of administration. As most institutions had been based on privilege, the Assembly now began the laborious task, which would take two years to complete, of replacing institutions and often personnel relating to local government, law, finance, the Church (whose income was halved by the loss of the tithe, so that it could no longer carry the burden of funding education, hospitals and poor relief) and the armed forces. Yet many thought that those who had lost power would try to recover it. There was a

widespread fear of an aristocratic plot and a feeling that, without constant vigilance, the victories of July and August could be quickly reversed.

The Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen

The August Decrees prepared the ground for the creation of a constitution. Before this, the deputies drew up the principles on which this should be based – the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen. It condemned the practices of the *ancien régime* and outlined the rights of citizens, as demanded in the *cahiers* of all three orders. The following are some of the key points from the Declaration:

- all men are born free and equal, in their rights
- the main rights of man are liberty, property, security and resistance to oppression
- power (sovereignty) rests with the people
- freedom of worship
- freedom of expression – speech and publication
- taxation to be borne by all in proportion to their means
- freedom to own property.

The Declaration would outlast the constitution to which it was later attached and was to be an important inspiration to liberals throughout Europe in the nineteenth century. For all its well-meaning sentiments, the Declaration mainly represented the interests of the property-owning bourgeoisie. Its significance, according to the historian George Rudé, is that '... it sounded the death-knell of the *ancien régime*, while preparing the public for the constructive legislation that was to follow'.

The nationalisation of Church land

By September the government was facing a serious financial crisis. Tax revenue was not flowing in and the government was unable to raise a loan to meet its costs. Many in the Assembly were contemplating radical action against the Church – one of the largest landowners in the country – in order to raise funds. After prolonged debates during late October and early November 1789, the Assembly agreed on 2 November 1789 that all the property owned by the Church should be placed at the disposal of the nation. This meant that Church land was nationalised. The State, for its part, would assume responsibility for looking after the clergy and carry out their work of helping the poor.

Bonds called *assignat* were issued and sold, backed up by the sale of Church land. These were used to settle debts and for purchasing goods and were accepted as currency. Royal land was also sold. It was anticipated that the sale of Church and royal land would raise around 400 million *livres*. This would go a long way towards meeting the financial needs of the government.

Key question

What was the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen and why was it important?

The issuing of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen: 26 August 1789

The National Constituent Assembly agrees to nationalise Church property, and in return the State will pay the salaries of priests and fund poor relief: 2 November 1789

Key dates

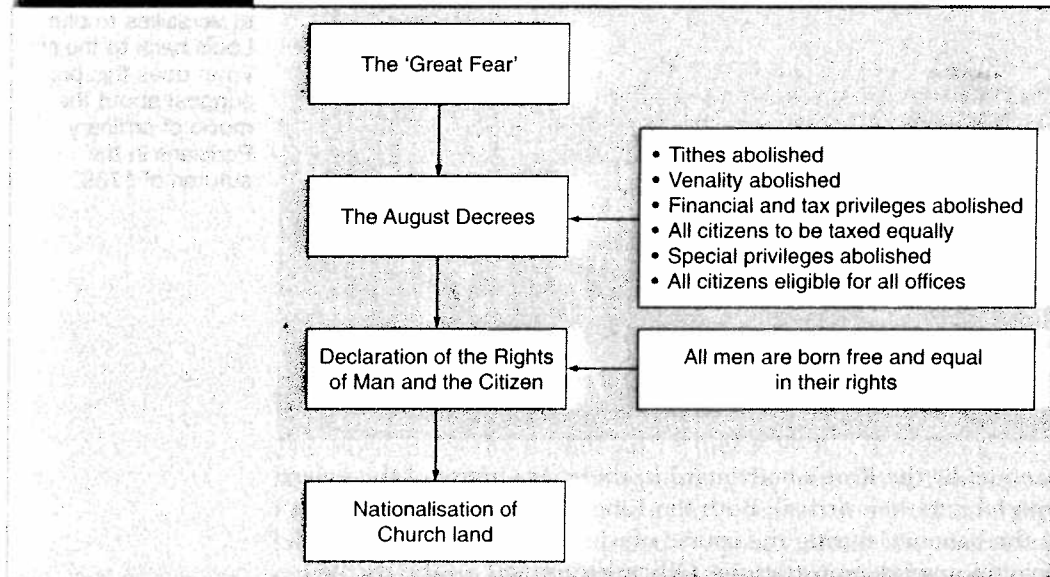
Key question

Why did the State take over the property of the Church?

Assignat

Bonds backed up by the sale of Church land that circulated as a form of paper currency.

Key term

Summary diagram: Dismantling the *ancien régime*

Key question

What effect did the changes have on the power of the monarchy?

5 | The Reaction of the Monarchy

The King did not share the general enthusiasm for the changes that were taking place and on 5 August he wrote to the Archbishop of Arles: 'I will never consent to the spoilation of my clergy and of my nobility. I will not sanction decrees by which they are despoiled'. He could not use force against the Assembly as the loyalty of the army was in doubt, with many officers and men sympathetic to the Revolution. Louis adopted instead a policy of non-cooperation and refused to officially support the August Decrees and the Declaration of Rights.

This forced the Assembly to consider the important question of what rights the King should have. Should he be able to veto or delay legislation passed by the Assembly? The deputies decided that the King should have a 'suspensive veto' – the power to suspend or delay all laws other than financial ones passed by the Assembly for a period up to four years.

No-one, at this stage, considered abolishing the monarchy and setting up a republic. It was agreed by the deputies that **legislative power** should reside with the National Assembly and that no taxes or loans could be raised without its consent, while '... supreme **executive power** resides exclusively in the King's hands'.

The October Days

The King's refusal to approve the Assembly's decrees caused considerable tension. That he was forced to do so was the consequence of another revolutionary *journée*. Louis decided to reinforce his guard by summoning to Versailles the loyal Flanders regiment. On the evening of 1 October, they were given a

Key terms

Legislative power

The power to make laws. In an absolute system this power belongs solely to the Crown. In a democracy legislative power rests with an elected parliament.

Executive power

The power to make decisions relating to the government of a country.



A print showing the women of Paris going to Versailles to bring Louis back to the city. What does this print suggest about the mood of ordinary Parisians in the autumn of 1789?

banquet by the King's bodyguard in the opera house of the palace to celebrate their arrival. Both the King and Queen were present at the banquet, during the course of which there were anti-revolutionary demonstrations. Officers trampled on the tricolour cockade and replaced it with the white cockade of the Bourbons. When news of this reached Paris, feelings ran high and there were demands that the King should be brought back to the capital.

This demand coincided with a food shortage in Paris. On 5 October a crowd of women stormed the Hôtel de Ville, the headquarters of the Commune, demanding bread. They were persuaded to march to Versailles to put their complaints to the King and the Assembly. Six or seven thousand of them set off on the five-hour march. Later in the day 20,000 National Guards, under Lafayette, followed them.

When the women reached Versailles they invaded the Assembly and sent a deputation to the King, who agreed to provide Paris with grain. He also agreed to approve the August Decrees and the Declaration of Rights. On 6 October, at the request of the crowd, the King and Queen appeared on a balcony and were greeted with cries of 'To Paris'. That afternoon the royal family left Versailles. The National Assembly also moved to Paris. These dramatic events are known as the October Days.

Louis XVI and the royal family are brought to Paris: 5–6 October 1789

Key date

The significance of the October Days

The 'October Days' were a very significant event in the early phase of the Revolution. The crowd that marched to Versailles aimed to bring the royal family back to Paris where their freedom of action and political influence would, it was hoped, be significantly reduced. Once in Paris the King regarded himself as a prisoner of the Paris mob and therefore not bound by anything he was forced to accept. When Parisians had revolted in July, they had seen the Assembly as their ally. In October, the Assembly had been ignored and humiliated by the decisive action of ordinary Parisians. When the deputies followed the King to Paris, some of them felt as much imprisoned as the King did. Most deputies wanted to work out a compromise with Louis, but this was much

more difficult for them in Paris, surrounded by a population which could impose its will on the Assembly by another *journée*.

Following the 'October Days' the Assembly issued a decree that changed the title and status of the monarch, from 'King of France and Navarre' to 'Louis, by the grace of God and the constitutional law of the State, King of the French'. Louis was now subordinate to the law, and his subjects now became citizens. There had been a shift in the balance of power towards Paris and its increasingly politicised population. Many moderate deputies distrusted the population of Paris almost as much as they did the King, although it was the popular movement and their *journées* that had enabled them to defeat Louis in the first place.

6 | The Key Debate

The storming of the Bastille on 14 July 1789 has become for large numbers of people the symbol of the start of the French Revolution. The anniversary of its fall is commemorated annually in France amidst great pomp and ceremony. Many historians have studied the event and a central question that they address is:

Was the storming of the Bastille of any significance?

E.D. Bradby

E.D. Bradby, writing in the early part of the twentieth century, concluded that the fall of the Bastille had momentous consequences, particularly for the old order. When the population saw that when a government could be successfully defied, the power of that government was broken. The princes and nobles of the Court party saw it, and many of them fled during the first wave of emigration. He argues that whenever an old form of government is suddenly overturned, disorder and anarchy will follow.

H.A.L. Fisher

H.A.L. Fisher was a prominent historian turned Liberal politician. He suggested that the storming of the Bastille was part of a conspiracy financed by capitalists to get Necker back into office, as the only man who could ensure financial recovery. While the event was soiled by the brutal slaughter of the garrison he considered its capture to be a political masterpiece. Fisher stresses the international repercussions and argued that its fall was hailed throughout Europe as the end of secretive tyranny and arbitrary imprisonment, and heralded the dawn of a new age.

Jacques Godechot

Jacques Godechot seeks to set the storming of the Bastille firmly within the domestic French context. He dismisses the notion that the event was a plot or conspiracy instigated by the duc d'Orleans or anyone else, and argues that it needs to be viewed as part of a much wider revolutionary movement within France. Godechot considers that the Parisian rising of 14 July represents not only the peak of the national rising but also a stage in it. After this

date most of the towns and many of the villages of France were to imitate Paris with extraordinary swiftness. During the weeks that followed the fall of the Bastille, there arose everywhere revolutionary town councils, and citizens' militias, which soon assumed the name of National Guards. The Fourteenth of July, he believes is indeed one of the great days that made France.

William Doyle

William Doyle focuses on the events preceding 14 July when the domestic crisis facing the Crown deepened. Louis was compelled to accept that his authority was diminishing rapidly, and that the newly declared National Assembly was in the ascendant. For four tense weeks in the summer of 1789, the Queen, Artois and their circle plotted and schemed to reverse these achievements. Ultimately they were foiled by a wave of popular support for the stand taken by the Third Estate. The storming of the Bastille marked the climax of the movement. Challenged by it Louis XVI drew back, leaving the people of Paris convinced that they alone had saved the National Assembly from destruction. From that moment on events in Paris would largely dictate the course and shape of the Revolution.

Some key books in the debate

E.D. Bradby, *A Short History of the French Revolution 1789–1795* (Oxford University Press, 1926).

William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution* (Oxford University Press, 1989).

H.A.L. Fisher, *A History of Europe*, Vol II (Fontana, 1960).

Jacques Godechot, *The Taking of the Bastille July 14th 1789* (Faber, 1970).

George Rudé, *The French Revolution* (Weidenfeld, 1988).

Study Guide: AS Questions

In the style of AQA

- (a) Explain why issues of voting procedure created problems for the Estates-General in May to June 1789. (12 marks)
- (b) How important was the rural revolt of the spring and summer 1789 in the dismantling of the *ancien régime* by the National Assembly in August 1789? (24 marks)